

Garden of Growth: Horticulture as a Therapy Tool

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Images by Mitchell L. Hewson

Horticultural Therapy promotes a natural sense of wellness through a non-invasive form of therapy. Nature enlivens our perception of life and gives you meaning and hope; the grass seems greener, the sky is bluer and the flowers are brighter. As Marcel Proust once said, “The real voyage of discovery consists not in seeking new landscapes but in having new eyes”.

As a treatment method for persons with psychological health issues, Horticultural Therapy is a valid—and increasingly popular—intervention. Its positive effect on clients, including those who suffer from post-traumatic, stress, dementia, addictions and other forms of mental illnesses, are borne out by both anecdotal and empirical evidence. Through the use of “living” materials—flowering plants, fruits, vegetables and herbs—Horticultural Therapy stimulates thought, exercises the body and encourages an awareness of the external environment. Moreover, clients who have benefitted from this type of therapy report a renewed desire to live, with decreased anxiety or stress. This positive response produces a natural drug in the brain called dopamine, resulting in positive feelings and self-confidence.

Horticultural Therapy is no doubt successful because of its client-centred approach. Also known as Rogerian psychotherapy, this type of humanistic programming encourages the patient to play an active role in their rehabilitation. Treatment goals are established for each individual—unique to their needs and capabilities. In Horticultural Therapy classes, assessments and treatments are conducted within natural environments: indoor sunrooms, conservatories, outdoors or raised-bed gardens. The horticultural therapist assumes the dual role of therapist and horticulturalist, working with the client on a number of objectives geared towards improving the quality of life for clients with mental health issues.

Natural light is an important ingredient for an effective therapeutic programme. Elderly people require three times the amount of light for sight, depth perception, and overall health and safety. In addition to these physical needs, the elderly also respond positively to natural light; studies have shown that sunlight improves body rhythms and Vitamin D levels.



There is something magical and curative in the powers of nature. Flowers perpetuate themselves with their seeds, repeating the cycle of life. Nature is forgiving, as one plant dies another can grow in its place. The life cycle of plants provides us with hope of life renewed and a chance to begin again.

Besides the physical benefits of gardening, there are also countless social and emotional benefits. Gardening can be used as a character builder by improving self-esteem and restoring confidence. It can also serve as a memory enhancer, stimulating memories of former gardens and old skills. As a social activity, gardening can provide an avenue for socialisation and interaction. With the wide variety of colours, scents and textures available in nature, outdoor gardens create a plethora of sensations that stimulates the mind and exercises the body. Raised-bed gardens make it easier for those with physical limitations to garden from a sitting or standing position through providing a good range of movement.

Bending, weeding, and planting: as an activity, the act of gardening increases upper and lower body strength and range of motion. It also encourages mobility, enhances circulation and cardiovascular ability, builds endurance and strength, and improves coordination.

The garden can be designed and utilised as a living lab that plays a major role in determining the cognitive, behavioural and spiritual level at which a client is functioning. Psychological burials for persons with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), grief gardening techniques for loss and closure, growing healing gardens for persons with eating disorders—are only some of the ways of using horticultural therapy methods to assist the client in healing, building hope and moving towards a survivor role.

Horticulture provides excellent stimuli through the various senses of sight, taste, touch and smell. Clients are encouraged to share their feelings and emotions through group and individual interactions. Individual goals that have been established for patients help to promote self-esteem and develop positive leisure skills that will aid in the recovery process. Patients who are depressed learn to channel negative emotions into constructive activities that help to promote feelings of optimism, self-confidence and self-worth. Therapeutic projects also provide an outlet for creativity and imagination.





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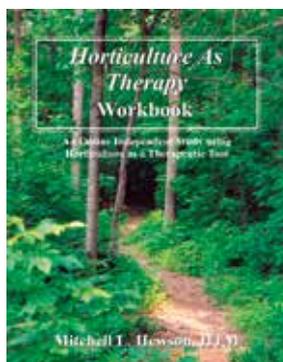
In working with specialised populations, patients with addiction issues learn self-actualisation and coping methods for recovery. A patient recounts his experience with this therapy method: "Horticulture did for me what I never felt I could do for myself. To be truthful, my understanding of this word (horticulture) had something to do with the forest or wide, rolling fields. When I came to Homewood, I learned that horticulture has to do with self-nurturing—how a person can look after themselves in a caring way. I learned that there is an unexplained power when one is caring for a simple plant. For me, the plants represented different nationalities, black, white, brown and others. If I could look after these plants, see them as unique—even those with long, sharp needles—and see the beauty in them, I was on the road to tolerance. Interpersonal relationships, cooperation, giving up control and learning to listen were only a few of the benefits of horticulture. I can use these skills to help create a healthier and more tolerant society."

One of the elderly clients at Homewood Health Centre was admitted with a diagnosis of reactive depression, brought on by the death of his wife. He led an active lifestyle beforehand, until the death of his wife left him depressed, lonely and with little interest in life. He was socially isolated and physically weak from inactivity. With encouragement, he attended the horticulture program, participating in a range of activities from the propagation of plants to planting vegetables in containers and raised beds. The patient had been a farmer for most of his life, and was delighted to know he had the ability to share his experience and skills with others. Upon discharge, he built raised containers and planters on his balcony. He said, "Gardening gave me another chance to use my skills to care for something and reconnect with life." Horticultural Therapy had helped him to rediscover his strengths and abilities—giving him a renewed sense of purpose and hope in life.

Even for those who have limited access to outdoor garden space, there are still many opportunities to connect with nature: patio gardens with planted containers, mixed planters with flowers, herbs and vegetables; balcony boxes and hanging plants. Herbs can be grown with the aid of grow lights, cultivated for use in teas or other culinary purposes. Terrariums and low light gardens are ideal for decoration, while clean-air plants purify the air by reducing toxins in small spaces like apartments. Communal gardens and garden plots provide an environment for sharing, socializing and growing vegetables. A walk in the park can also provide relaxation, fuel for the imagination and many other physical benefits. Extracting essential oils from plants and herbs for aromatherapy is a way to use nature's ingredients for pain, stress, and skin conditions.

Introducing fresh flowers in your living space can provide beauty, fragrance and a sense of calm. By creating your own therapeutic spaces with plants, it can be a significant tool in promoting safety mindfulness and a sense of wellbeing.

There is a great amount of research being done throughout the world on the therapeutic relationships between nature and health. Organisations such as the Canadian Horticultural Therapy Association (CHTA), American Horticultural Therapy Association (AHTA), and other horticultural therapy associations in Japan and Korea provide documented research through books, articles and journals on therapeutic effects of nature to promote psychological, physical, and spiritual functioning and well-being. 



Transcending International borders: Horticultural Therapy as an effective treatment modality for specialised populations through e-distance courses.

Through e-distance courses, international students from around the world are now able to study and share valuable insights and perspectives on the field of Horticultural Therapy. This growing pool of talent is transforming the lives of others through their understanding of nature as a therapeutic tool.

Students from the United States, India, South Africa, Singapore, Holland, South America, Scandinavia, Switzerland, Australia, New Zealand, China, Japan, and Cuba are selecting an innovative and exciting curriculum with 120 hours of study to earn a certificate in horticultural therapy.

This e-course on Horticultural Therapy is the most popular way for students to study Horticultural Therapy in cases where they cannot attend a regular classroom setting. Students can access this course at any time—providing flexibility for busy lifestyles, and the value of individual coaching.

Its independent-study format provides an all-inclusive guide for students to develop and understand the field of Horticultural Therapy. The text—in either a hard copy or electronic file format—can be used in many ways: as a guide to starting a Horticultural Therapy program, to enrich one's lifestyle, or as a pathway to a new career.

The course is based on Mitchell's extensive clinical experience at Homewood Health Centre, the first and longest-running Horticultural Therapy program in Canada. The course includes topics like: designing for specialised populations, therapeutic plants, understanding psychiatric diagnosis, creative arts, therapeutic design and a new component—clinical assessments. At present, this is the only online psychiatric course in Horticultural Therapy in Canada.

The textbook and workbook (20 chapters) are written for the student's understanding of the role of horticulture as a treatment modality for specialised populations: dementia, eating disorders, depression, trauma, substance abuse and schizophrenia.

This educational pathway is now a combination of the e-distance course and Mitchell's classroom content, encompassing a number of learning objectives. Students will be required to work through the following study matrix:

- Key concepts—each chapter includes an introduction, objectives and self-evaluation.
- Three major papers to be marked and assessed for knowledge and understanding of course material.
- Completion of a clinical assessment and documentation.
- Upon successful completion of the e-distance course "Using Horticulture as a Therapeutic Tool", students will receive a Certificate in Horticultural Therapy with a mental health specialty stipulating the total hours of study.

For further information on the e-distance courses of study please contact: horticultureastherapy@gmail.com.